

can be derived during the process of home winemaking and time spent experiencing such a symbiotic relationship with nature.

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GRAHAM HARDING: *Champagne in Britain, 1800–1914: How the British transformed a French luxury*

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Champagne in Britain is an academic monograph, the third in a series on *Food in Modern History* that aims to pay “serious attention to food as a focal point in historical events from the late eighteenth century to the present day.” Its 189 pages of sometimes dense text are supported by 106 pages of endnotes, bibliography, and index. It seems to be written mainly for British readers, who presumably understand, without any explanation, the significance of the relief of Ladysmith and the lifting of the siege of Mafeking. The author turned to academic history after 40 years as a branding and marketing consultant specializing in food and drink. He is an associate of the History Faculty at Oxford, and this book seems to have been based at least in part on his PhD dissertation.

All this is to say that this is not a standard wine book, nor is it a particularly easy read, particularly for non-British readers. On the other hand, if you are interested in wine, history, and the evolution of markets and marketing, *Champagne in Britain* tells—and thoroughly documents—two fascinating, intertwined stories. The first describes the evolution in 19th century Britain of both the product sold as champagne and its social role in the country. The second story focuses on the establishment, around 1880, of a relatively small set of champagne brands that were among the world’s first mass luxury brands, able to command premium prices from a relatively large audience despite considerable competition. Many of those brands, including Moët & Chandon, Louis Roederer, Veuve Clicquot, Pol Roger, and Pommery, have been on the British market since the early 19th century and remain premium brands today. In Britain and elsewhere, they continue to command prices significantly above those of well-made sparkling wines from Italy, California, and other regions.

As I expect readers of this *Journal* know, the province of Champagne in northern France has always had a favorable location near wealthy markets but an unfortunate climate for wine-making. Grapes grown there ripen late, and fermentation is often

halted by winter frosts. In warmer springtime weather, fermentation might re-start and create a carbonated, sparkling wine. At least by the mid-17th century, it was understood that adding sweet liquids could enhance secondary fermentation, but the process was not well understood for decades. Some, particularly among the nobility, appreciated sparkling wine before the 19th century, and it had established a clear image of luxury, hedonism, and celebration. Unfortunately, the gas created by secondary fermentation broke a high proportion of the flimsy bottles then available, and, in part as a consequence, sparkling champagne was exceedingly expensive.

Early in the 19th century, alcohol in Britain was mainly consumed as beer and spirits. Periodic drunkenness was common and, indeed, somewhat fashionable. Until the middle of the century, port and, especially, sherry from the Iberian Peninsula dominated wine consumption; they accounted for around 70% of British wine consumption until the 1860s. The high alcohol content of these fortified wines retarded spoilage, and their sweetness had mass appeal. Even as late as 1843, French wines accounted for only 5% of British wine consumption, and champagne sales were negligible.

Between 1843 and 1898, sales of champagne in Britain increased by roughly a factor of 20, and the product changed almost as dramatically:

In 1800, champagne was as often still as sparkling. When sparkling it was almost universally sweet – a wine to be drunk after rather than with food. In colour it was grey or amber (even red). By 1900 ... champagne in Britain had been transformed. In colour it was typically pale gold, unequivocally sparkling, and almost universally dry.

Champagne in Britain describes a number of factors that drove these profound changes. First, wine was traditionally shipped in casks to Britain and bottled there, but to retain its effervescence, sparkling wine had to be shipped in bottles. This reduced the risk of adulteration, but, as noted, champagne bottles were very prone to breakage until stronger bottles were developed in Britain around 1800. This development reduced the relative transport costs of sparkling wines.

Second, beginning in the 1820s, the British upper classes led a (mild) temperance movement that discouraged drunkenness and the consumption of fortified wines and spirits and encouraged the drinking of lighter wines, like champagne. Champagne was indeed sometimes advertised as a health drink, particularly for women, because of its low alcohol content. Drier wines became more popular during the course of the century, in part to limit consumption of sugar for health reasons. This is not to say that champagne's celebratory image became a disadvantage: the "saucer" glass, used only for champagne, came into widespread use in the 1840s entirely because it enhanced the visual appeal of the wine's effervescence.

Third, by the 1840s, champagne producers had more or less mastered blending and "dosage" with sweetener so that they could produce a consistent product year after year—a consistency that producers of unfortified still wines could not match. In part, as a consequence, sparkling champagne had largely replaced still champagne by 1850.

Finally, the Gladstone budgets of 1860–1862, aimed to enhance the nation's health by basing beverage taxation on alcohol content and thereby sharply reducing the

relative costs of champagne and other unfortified wines. In addition, licensing restrictions on sales of wine by restaurants, grocers, and other shopkeepers were reduced. The wholesaler, W. & A. Gilbey, aggressively expanded its number of outlets after these restrictions were reduced. It initially sold its many products, including sparkling champagne, under the “Castle” brand, which was perhaps the first “range” brand (like “Heinz 57” much later) that was attached to a diverse array of products. By 1868, the scale of Gilbey’s business was so impressive that an observer in the trade press could assert that “competition is futile.”

This leads to *Champagne in Britain’s* second story, the rise of premium champagne brands, particularly during Britain’s post-1860 prosperity. As a consequence of the dominance of premium champagne brands, despite its scale and its reputation for low prices and good quality, in 1882, Gilbey dropped its “Castle” brand for champagne, but kept the brand for all its many other products. Gilbey switched to promoting the more expensive brands of Moët & Chandon (which had been sold in Britain since at least 1800) and other French houses, instead of its own brand. Champagne had become a mass luxury good, a focus of Veblenesque conspicuous consumption available to many beyond the nobility and the very rich.

Champagne had a number of attributes that made it a natural mass luxury good, particularly after dinner parties became popular in Britain in the 1860s. Since the champagne came to the table in its original bottle, rather than in a decanter, the host could automatically show off his good taste and, because champagne was always expensive, his wealth. Hosts did not need expertise or a butler to serve champagne well; it is easy to store, and it does not need to be decanted. By the 1860s, most producers were able to deliver consistent quality, so a host could be sure of serving good champagne if he bought a known brand—and the brand name on the cork was a good guarantee against fraud or adulteration. Finally, since saucer glasses were used only for champagne, guests who did not regularly drink champagne could avoid any awkwardness about which glass to use to imbibe it.

For all of those reasons, it might have been inevitable that champagne became an important focus of conspicuous consumption in Britain after 1860. But, the author argues, there was nothing inevitable about the dominance of a handful of premium brands. These were produced by French houses that had no direct knowledge of the British market and employed agents who played a key role in marketing. As British fashion shifted toward ever dryer champagne, with the elite leading and others following, the agents generally pressed their clients to follow that fashion—even though the British demanded dryer wines than other nations, and even though many argued that Britons drank very dry champagne only because it was fashionable, not because they liked it.

Successful champagne agents innovated what have since become standard marketing tactics for luxury goods. They limited distribution to select hotels, clubs, restaurants, and merchants, sometimes offering bribes to ensure that their brand was available in choice locations. They worked to be suppliers to the Queen or other nobles and to have that fact widely known. The prestige brands did some advertising in suitable media, but many of their agents worked harder at getting positive mentions in editorial content—as suppliers to royalty or as having enlivened major social

events, for instance. Having your label visible in a cartoon in *Punch* was apparently worth more than a lot of paid ads.

As major champagne brands became established as luxury goods, their agents continually pressed the shippers for price increases, and some of these agents engaged in forms of resale price maintenance to ensure that their price increases were passed through to consumers. After 1874, the premium producers began vintage dating, creating an illusion of scarcity that supported raising prices. Between 1875 and 1905, the average price for premium champagne rose 20%; even though wine prices were generally falling over this period, premium champagne seems not to have suffered any loss of share.

Two significant courtroom achievements reduced the competition faced by premium champagne brands. It had long been held in British law that a man was free to do business under his own name. Thus, somebody named John Roederer could sell sparkling wine with a label that closely resembled that of Louis Roederer. A British court in 1874 outlawed that sort of deception. In addition, the term “champagne” had come to be a generic label that could be applied to any sparkling wine. In 1887, a French court held that only wine produced in the province of Champagne could be so labeled. This important decision laid the foundation for the broader AOC regime adopted in France in the 1930s.

I enjoyed this book and learned a good deal from reading it and trying to organize its most important findings into this review. Neither was an easy process, however. Given its steep price, I would not recommend purchasing *Champagne in Britain* unless you are potentially very interested in the development of champagne as a luxury good during the 19th century in Britain—and perhaps even then, only if you can get the book at a deep discount.